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## Plane readies for new mission

### Unmanned craft on science patrol

By Jim Skeen, Staff Writer

An Altair aircraft, a cousin of the Predator drone used by the military, will conduct research off of the Pacific Coast. (Gene Blevins / LA Daily News)

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**PALMDALE -- Unmanned aircraft technology used for tracking down terrorists in the Middle East will be put to use this spring to conduct science missions off the Pacific Coast.**

**An Altair aircraft, an offshoot of the Predator B reconnaissance aircraft being used to support the War on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan, will be used in a series of missions to demonstrate the use of unmanned aircraft to support oceanic, atmospheric and climate research.**

**The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and General Atomics Aeronautical Systems are partnering on the project.**

**A demonstration flight of the Altair with its science instrument payload was conducted Wednesday at General Atomics' Gray Butte facility, about 25 miles east of Palmdale.**

**"We are using it for what I would call environmental security," NOAA administrator Conrad Lautenbacher Jr. said. "It brings to the scientists the physics, chemistry and biology of this world."**

**NOAA officials said unmanned aircraft have the potential to see weather before it happens, detect toxins in the air, and discover harmful and costly algae blooms before they can injure or kill fish.**

**There also is a potential for homeland security missions to piggyback onto the**

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**science missions, such as providing another set of eyes for the Coast Guard.**

**A series of six flights is planned, each originating from NASA Dryden Flight Research Center at Edwards Air Force Base. The flights will last anywhere from four hours to 22 hours in duration. The Altair can carry an internal 660-pound payload of sensors and other scientific equipment to altitudes as high as 52,000 feet.**

**The Altair is actually flown by a human at a ground station. A second person operates cameras and other equipment.**

**The Altair's payload will include instruments to watch ocean color and temperature, make ozone measurements, and map shorelines and habitats.**

**These instruments can be used to improve fisheries management through better assessment of ecosystem health; forecast algal blooms; help scientists estimate greenhouse gases potentially associated with climate change and global warming; help determine when flash flood warnings must be issued; and help monitor ecosystems, including tracking spills and aquatic diseases.**

**The use of unmanned aircraft can fill the gap between the information that is collected through satellites and ground stations. The aircraft can provide longer looks at an area than a manned aircraft.**

**"These airplanes will be going up higher and staying up longer, which should be attractive to the science community," said Thomas Cassidy Jr., president and chief executive officer of General Atomics.**

**The project also fits in with an effort by NASA and a host of other partners, including aircraft manufacturers, to expand the capabilities of unmanned aircraft and to work with the Federal Aviation Administration to develop technologies, procedures and policies that will allow such aircraft to operate routinely in national airspace.**

**Among the goals of that effort is to develop an unmanned aircraft capable of flying for two weeks at a time and to develop technologies to allow a single**

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***operator to safely fly multiple UAVs at a time.***

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